



SDPI
Sustainable Development Policy Institute

Political Economy Report

Political Economy Analysis of Women's Political Participation in Pakistan



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List of Abbreviations

ANP	Awami National Party
BNP	Baloch National Party
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
ECP	Election Commission of Pakistan
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
JI	Jamaat-e-Islami
JUI-F	Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (Fazl)
KII	Key Informant Interview
MQM	Muttahida Quami Movement
NA	National Assembly
NCSW	National Commission on the Status of Women
PA	Provincial Assembly
PML-N	Pakistan Muslim League - Nawaz
PPPP	Pakistan People's Party Parliamentarians
PTI	Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SDPI	Sustainable Development Policy Institute
WPC	Women Parliamentary Caucus

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This study is a part of SDPI's broader commitment to strengthening evidence-based policy

Executive Summary

Women's political participation in Pakistan has gradually increased over the decades, yet persistent structural and institutional barriers continue to limit their meaningful inclusion. Reserved seats in the National Assembly, Senate, and Provincial Assemblies have grown from only two members (3%) in 1947 to 60 members (17%) in the current National Assembly. Directly elected women remain few, only 13 in 2002–2007, 16 in 2008–2013, 8 in 2018–2023, and 12 in 2024, highlighting the continued reliance on party leadership for political advancement. Provincial legislatures exhibit similar disparities, with Punjab electing 10 women on general seats, while Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa elect only two each (elections 2024). Even as the number of women contesting general elections increases, 464 in 2018 and 312 in 2024, success remains contingent on party support, as independent female candidates rarely succeed.

Empirical evidence demonstrates that women parliamentarians perform effectively once in office. Between 2024 and March 2025, they introduced 55% of private members' bills in the National Assembly and 31% in the Senate (FAFEN, 2025). Women have actively tabled resolutions, raised questions, moved calling attention notices, and sponsored private members' bills. Their legislative engagement spans gender equality, climate resilience, economic equity, and institutional reforms, demonstrating capability beyond gender-specific issues. Cross-party collaboration through the Women Parliamentary Caucus further highlights their influence in advancing substantive policy agendas.

Despite these achievements, women remain underrepresented relative to their population share of nearly 49%. They currently occupy only 20% of National Assembly seats and 9.4% of ministerial positions. The internationally recognized "critical mass" of 33% remains unmet. Reserved seats have, in many cases, become a ceiling rather than a springboard for political inclusion. Geographic distortions persist, with half of Punjab's reserved-seat women drawn from Lahore and half of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's from Peshawar. Across Pakistan's 136 districts, 105 have no women representatives on reserved seats. Women's representation in party leadership remains disproportionately low, and most are accountable primarily to party hierarchies rather than constituents, limiting influence and visibility in core decision-making processes.

Building on prior SDPI research, particularly the 2025 Discussion Paper Raising Her Voice in Political Parties, this study emphasizes that systemic reforms are necessary to translate demonstrated legislative competence into equitable representation. Weak enforcement of gender inclusion provisions entrenched patriarchal norms, and limited access to resources continue to constrain women's advancement within political parties. Women legislators consistently call for a minimum of 33% representation across all decision-making forums within parties and assemblies to achieve meaningful inclusion and align Pakistan with international frameworks, including Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), International Covenant on Civil and Political (ICCPR), Universal Declaration of Human Rights (ICCPR), Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Based on this, SDPI recommends:

1. **Mandatory 33% Representation:** Women must constitute at least one-third of all elected and non-elected decision-making forums within political parties, including Central Committees, Executive Councils, and Coordination Bodies, to ensure effective participation in setting party position on various issues.
2. **Party-Level Gender Audits:** The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) should conduct regular audits to assess compliance with gender inclusion mandates, track women's representation at all tiers, and hold parties accountable for meeting the 33% benchmark.
3. **Women's Inclusion in Party Registration:** At least one-third of the cohort recommending the registration of new political parties should be women, embedding gender equity at the foundation of party structures.

Implementing these measures will create a more inclusive political ecosystem, strengthen institutional mechanisms for women's participation, and advance Pakistan's constitutional and international commitments to gender equality.

1. INTRODUCTION

In Pakistan, the formal debate on women's political participation primarily revolves around their numerical representation in legislatures as well as the modalities of their selection or election. After a long debate spanning years, there is a gradual increase in the reserved seats for women in the national and provincial assemblies and the Senate of Pakistan from two women members (3 per cent) in the 1947 Legislative/Constituent Assembly to 60 (17 per cent) in the present National Assembly (NA). Reserved seats for women are proportionate to the number of elected members of a party and are drawn from the lists submitted to the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) before each general election.

Table 1: Women Representation in the National Assembly, 1947–2024

Sr. No	National Assembly	Women Representation
1	1947–1954	02 seats
2	1955–1958	Nil
3	1962–1965	08 seats
4	1965–1969	06 seats
5	1972–1977	06 seats
6	March – July 1977	10 seats
7	1985– 1988	22 seats
8	1988–1990	23 seats
9	1990–1993	02 seats
10	1997–1999	06 seats
11	2002–2007	73 seats
12	2008–2013	76 seats
13	2013–2018	69 seats
14	2018 – 2023	68 seats
15	2024-onwards	60 seats

Sources: Qasim et al (2025), Discussion Paper: Raising Her Voice in Political Parties

Some women contest elections and are directly elected to general seats, thereby increasing the overall number beyond the mandatory 60. However, their share fluctuates and remained limited, as evident through the figures below: 13 in 2002–2007, 16 in 2008–2013, 8 in 2018–2023, and 12 in 2024. In terms of numbers and influence, these figures remain modest.

National Assembly Tenure	2002–2007	2008–2013	2018–2023	2024-onward
No. of Women elected on general Seats	13	16	8	12

The provincial situation is even more discouraging. In current assembly in Punjab, with a total of 79 women seats, 10 have been directly elected, while Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) each

have two. The number of women contestants in general elections was: 464 in 2018 and 312 in 2024, which reflects aspiration among women to participate in national politics.

An analysis of electoral trends indicates that party support is essential for women's success. Almost all women elected to general seats had the backing of their respective parties, as did most of those who lost narrowly apart from those fielded to meet the 5 percent mandatory ticket requirement. In the 2018 general elections, at least 10 women lost their seats in the closely contested NA constituencies (National Commission on the Status of Women, 2018, p. 21), nine of whom had formal party endorsements. Data show that women contesting as independents have virtually no chance of winning national or provincial elections.

If women are to be mainstreamed in politics, as the Constitution envisages, and to represent female constituents in proportion to their population share, two dimensions require deeper examination:

(a) current legal provisions; and

(b) the dynamics of candidate's selection within political parties, specifically how women are chosen on general and reserved seats, what selection criteria are applied, and what role women's wings and female office-bearers play in these processes; Equally important is to understand women's participation in party forums where such decisions are made and varied perspectives on gender mainstreaming within party structures.

Furthermore, a political economy perspective reveals that women's limited presence in Pakistan's legislatures is shaped less by constitutional design and more by the underlying distribution of power, resources, and incentives within the electoral system. Political parties operate within an environment dominated by patronage networks, biradari structures, market-driven campaign financing, and informal hierarchies that privilege actors, usually men, who can mobilize votes, finance campaigns, and negotiate with local power brokers. These features influence candidate selection far more than merit or representational equity. Women, who often lack access to the financial capital, constituency patronage, and political brokerage required to be deemed "winnable," are systematically filtered out of general seats. Even on reserved seats, their political mobility remains contingent on party leadership rather than constituency mandates, reinforcing patterns of dependency and limiting their bargaining power within party forums.

These political economy dynamics create a reinforcing cycle: exclusion from internal party structures limits women's visibility and influence; limited influence reduces their chances of being nominated for competitive seats; and minimal presence in general seats further marginalizes women's voices in shaping party agendas. As a result, women's representation, though numerically improved through reserved seats, remains confined within the parameters set by male-dominated political institutions. Understanding these constraints is essential to assessing why gender quotas have not translated into substantive political power for women and why deeper institutional reforms, beyond legal provisions, are required for meaningful inclusion.

Women legislators have repeatedly demonstrated their competence and commitment while regularly tabling resolutions, submitting starred and un-starred questions, moving calling-attention notices, cut motions, and private members' bills. In the current NA, most of private members' bills have been moved by women, accounting for 55 per cent of the NA agenda (March 2024 to March 2025) and 31 per cent in the Senate (Fair and Free Election Network, 2025). Their high attendance, formation of the unique cross-party Women Parliamentary Caucus (WPC), and sponsorship of key protective laws affirm women's active and constructive role in national and provincial assemblies (Khan & Naqvi, 2020, p. 287). Beyond gender-specific legislation, women parliamentarians have advanced perspectives on broader issues of public policy such as climate resilience, economic inequality, and institutional reforms to make parliamentary processes more inclusive.

Historical records from 1947 to-date further illustrate the sensitivity of women's engagement in legislative debate that revolves around the questions of women representation, family laws, employment, education, and discrimination alongside broader social concerns (Mumtaz, 1998, pp. 325–326). Naeema Kishwar Khan, Member National Assembly, JUI-P, says:

"Women legislators have consistently demonstrated greater commitment and performance in parliamentary proceedings. Their attendance, participation in legislative debates, and use of parliamentary instruments far exceed those of their male counterparts. This reflects not only discipline but also a stronger sense of accountability towards public service."

Notwithstanding this progress, significant gaps remain. Although women constitute approximately 49 per cent of Pakistan's population, they make up only 20 per cent of legislators in the current Assembly and 9.4 per cent of ministerial positions (SDPI, 2025). The United Nations prescribed "critical mass" of 33 percent representation in legislatures remains unmet. The 2002 local-government reforms introduced by the Gen. Musharraf regime earmarked a 33 per cent quota for women, but subsequent provincial legislation either reversed it or reduced it. Consequently, the quota that was intended as a springboard for women's mainstreaming has become a ceiling that limits their inclusion in decision-making.

The reserved-seat system also reveals structural distortions. Women elected under this mechanism are largely concentrated in urban centers, i.e. approximately 50 per cent from Lahore (Punjab) and 50 per cent from Peshawar (KP) (Key Informant Interviews). Out of 136 districts nationwide, 105 have no women representatives on reserved seats. Women's presence in political-party leadership is similarly low; those occupying reserved seats are often more accountable to party leadership than to people of their respective areas.

To explore pathways for reducing gender disparities in political participation, this study aims to:

- Assess political-party institutional structures under the *Political Parties Order 2002* and the *Election Act 2017*, with particular focus on Chapter 11 of the latter.
- Analyze internal party power dynamics decision-making and patronage networks and their effect on women's participation in party leadership and policy making.

- Evaluate the broader ecosystem for political participation, identifying barriers that impede women's inclusion in elected and non-elected party forums.
- Examine women's inclusion in, and the role of, women wing of political parties, exploring whether such parallel structures would remain necessary if women were fully integrated across all party tiers.
- Recommend how a critical mass of women's representation (i.e. at least 33 per cent) can be achieved across all elected and non-elected decision-making forums within parties.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a mixed-method approach, combining secondary data and electoral statistics with qualitative insights from in-depth interviews with a cross-section of sitting and former women parliamentarians representing major political parties (Annexure-A). It builds upon the analytical framework of SDPI's earlier Discussion Paper, titled: *Raising Her Voice in Political Parties*¹, published in April this year (2025). It reviewed constitutional provisions, national laws, and Pakistan's international commitments while assessing party constitutions and internal structures.

Women parliamentarians interviewed for this study expressed deep dissatisfaction with the status quo. During the 2017 electoral-reform deliberations, the WPC recommended mandating political parties to allocate 15 per cent of general-seat tickets to women. The proposal for electing women on reserved seats through constituency-based elections resurfaced during the Women's Parliamentary Caucus (WPC) two-day seminar, *Reclaiming the Space: Reading the Constitution from Women's Perspective* (June 2023). The seminar advanced a broader reform agenda, calling for a gender-sensitive reinterpretation of constitutional provisions to strengthen women's political inclusion, urging that women not be confined to party-list reserved seats but supported to contest and win general seats, and emphasizing the need for sustained institutional mechanisms capable of translating constitutional guarantees into substantive gender equality (Staff Report, 2023). Although Members of the National Assembly such as Dr. Nafisa Shah and Dr. Azra Fazal Pechuho introduced a private member's bill in 2013 proposing a 33 per cent quota for women across all decision-making levels within political parties through amendments to the Political Parties Order 2002, the bill did not secure approval.

To enrich the empirical base, the present study complements secondary data with detailed interviews that reveal how political-party ecosystems function and how women navigate them

¹ The discussion paper highlights the absence of debate on women's participation in politics and calls for structural reforms within the political parties and the weak enforcement of gender inclusion provisions in the Political Parties Act 2002 and the Election Act 2017. It also identifies entrenched patriarchal political cultures, limited access to resources, and weak institutional enforcement as key barriers to women's advancement in politics.

from induction into parties and progression to leadership roles to nomination for reserved or general seats.

3. Legal Context and Compliance

Pakistan's Constitution, the Political Parties Order (PPO) 2002, later reformed and termed as the Elections Act (EA) 2017 provide the legal framework for the political mainstreaming of women as members of political parties, office-bearers, contestants in elections, and participants in decision-making structures.

The Constitution of Pakistan enshrines equality and non-discrimination as guiding principles. Article 25 guarantees all citizens "equality before the law and equal protection of the law," and further states that "there shall be no discrimination on the basis of sex alone." This establishes the constitutional foundation for women's inclusion in all spheres of national life, including political participation. Article 25(3)² permits the State to enact special provisions to protect and promote women's participation, while Article 34³ directs the State "to take appropriate measures to enable women to participate in all spheres of national life."

Articles 51⁴ and 106⁵ specifically provide for the reservation of seats for women in the National and Provincial assemblies, ensuring their inclusion in legislative processes and decision-making.

The *Political Parties Order 2002*⁶ operationalized these constitutional principles by requiring the political parties to reserve seats for women candidates in national and provincial legislatures. An amendment in 2013 (Article 8⁷) made it mandatory for political parties to allocate at least 10 per cent of their general election tickets to women. However, this provision was repealed under the *Elections Act 2017*⁸, which consolidated electoral laws and introduced its own mechanisms for ensuring women's participation.

Under the *Elections Act 2017*, specific provisions address both women's participation in the electoral process and their inclusion within political parties:

3.1. Key Provisions in the Electoral Process

²https://wdd.punjab.gov.pk/women_rights#:~:text=Article%2025%20ensures%20equality%20before,protection%20of%20women%20and%20children.

³ <https://www.pakistani.org/pakistan/constitution/part2.ch2.html>

⁴ <https://www.pakistani.org/pakistan/constitution/part3.ch2.html>

⁵ <https://www.pakistani.org/pakistan/constitution/part4.ch2.html>

⁶ <https://ecp.gov.pk/the-political-parties-order-2002-chief-executives-order-no-18-of-2002>

⁷ <https://www.pakistani.org/pakistan/constitution/part2.ch1.html>

⁸ <https://ecp.gov.pk/storage/files/2/Elections%20Act%202017%20updated/Updated%20Elections%20Act%202017-231011-105435.pdf>

- Section 12(c): Encourages women's participation in elections through affirmative action measures.
- Sections 18(1) and 18(2): Provide for reserved and general seats for women in the National and Provincial Assemblies.
- Section 226: Strengthens fair representation in the electoral process.

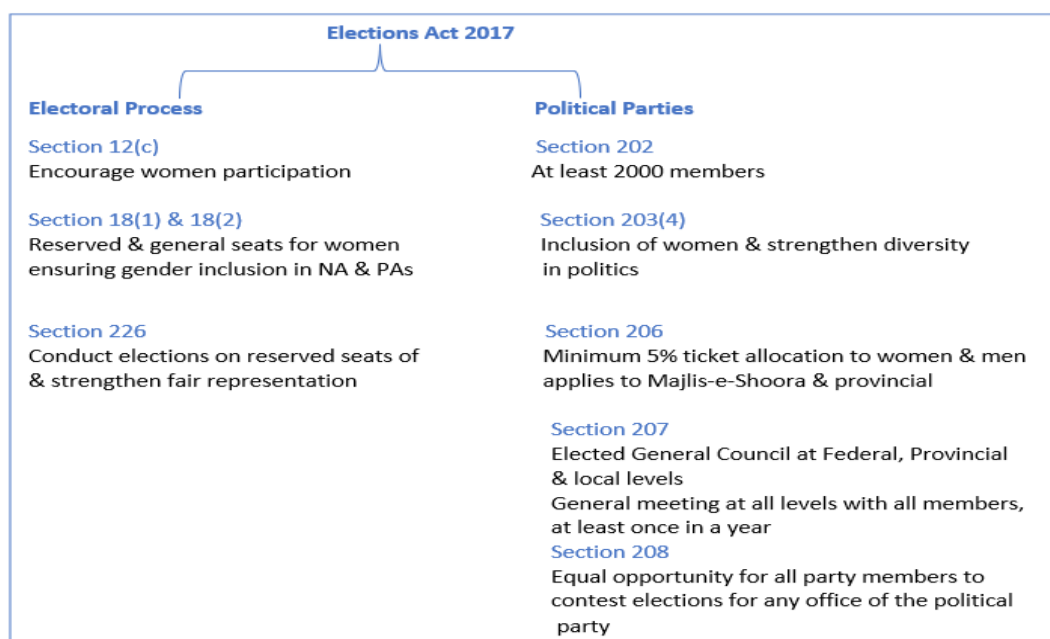
Source: Elections Act, 2017

3.2. Key Provisions Related to Political Parties

- Section 203(4): Mandates the inclusion of women in political parties.
- Section 206: Requires political parties to allocate a minimum of five percent of general seat tickets to women candidates in national and provincial assemblies.
- Sections 207–208: Prescribe democratic internal governance for political parties, including elected general councils at federal, provincial, and local levels, with equal opportunities for all members to contest party offices.

Source: Elections Act, 2017

Box 1: Summary of Provisions on Women's Representation in the Election Act 2017



Source: Qasim et al (2025), Discussion Paper: Raising Her Voice in Political Parties

While these constitutional and statutory frameworks collectively affirm women's right to political inclusion, several structural and procedural gaps persist. Political parties frequently meet legal requirements in form but not in spirit. For example, Section 202 of the Election Act 2017 mandates that a political party must have at least 2,000 members for registration with the Election Commission of Pakistan, but it does not specify any gender threshold. Consequently, women's

membership often remains symbolic rather than substantive. Similarly, while Section 12(c) “encourages” women’s participation, the wording is aspirational rather than binding, leaving compliance largely at the discretion of party leadership.

The five per cent quota for women’s general seat tickets has also proven insufficient. In both the 2018 and 2024 general elections, many political parties failed to meet even this minimal threshold, and when they did, most tickets were allocated for unwinnable constituencies. There were instances where parties such as the Balochistan National Party (Mengal) nominated women in provinces where the party had little to no political presence (e.g., Punjab) merely to fulfill the quota requirement (Key Informant Interview). Another major gap is the absence of prescribed ratios for women’s representation within the central decision-making structures of political parties such as Central Committees, Councils, and Executive Bodies. As a result, only a small number of women reach top leadership levels.

This limited presence within party hierarchies directly shapes women’s visibility in formal political offices, creating a consistent pattern of underrepresentation across the political sphere. Women’s underrepresentation, for instance, extends to senior political positions as well. While Punjab currently has a woman Chief minister, KP has a woman Deputy Speaker, and Balochistan and Sindh have only one and two women ministers respectively. Nonetheless, a few positions such as Parliamentary Secretaries, Chairs of Standing Committees, and Whips have gradually been opened for women. For example, in 2018, the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (Fazl) appointed its first woman Party Whip in the National Assembly.

The combined effect of these structural limitations and cultural attitudes is that women remain underrepresented at all levels of political engagement, from party membership to high offices. The existing legal framework, while progressive on paper, continues to be undermined by inadequate enforcement, limited accountability, and a lack of gender-disaggregated compliance monitoring.

In summary, Pakistan’s constitutional and statutory provisions establish an enabling environment for women’s participation in politics. However, inconsistent implementation, male-dominated political cultures, and the absence of binding enforcement mechanisms constrain women’s meaningful inclusion in both electoral processes and party decision-making forums. Strengthening legal compliance and instituting accountability mechanisms within political parties, therefore, remains a critical prerequisite for achieving gender parity in political representation.

4. Political Party Ecosystem

A review of Pakistan's parliamentary political parties shows that most maintain multi-tiered organizational structures extending from the national to provincial, district, and local levels, though their operational efficiency and membership composition vary. Consistent with the structural gaps identified earlier, women's participation within these internal hierarchies remains uneven. Most major parties, apart from a few exceptions, operate women's wings that function parallel to the mainstream organizational framework, a model that acknowledges women's presence but often limits their influence in core decision-making spaces.

One notable exception is the Awami National Party (ANP), which does not maintain a separate women's wing; instead, it integrates men and women within a unified organizational structure. The party's top-tier leadership includes five female Vice-Presidents and five female Joint Secretaries, reflecting a deliberate effort to ensure parity in office-bearers. Similarly, the Balochistan National Party (BNP) reserves ten seats for women in its Central Committee and maintains a designated Secretary for its Women's Section, mechanisms that formalize women's representation in leadership positions.

In contrast, most other large parliamentary parties continue to exhibit limited female representation in their upper leadership tiers. For instance, the Pakistan Muslim League (N) includes only one woman Vice-President and one woman Information Secretary among its seven senior leaders; the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) has one woman Information Secretary among four key office-bearers; the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) appoints a woman Deputy Convener among five senior figures; and the Istehkam-e-Pakistan Party (IPP) lists one woman Information Secretary among its top leadership. The Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) stands out slightly by maintaining a 10-member Women Shoora in addition to its women's wing, thereby creating a more formal consultative space for women.

The composition of these party structures mirrors Pakistan's broader socio-cultural and gendered power relations. Across the political spectrum, the ecosystem remains predominantly male-dominated, with only a handful of parties including women in apex decision-making bodies such as Central Committees, Executive Councils, or Coordination Committees. Even when women are included, their appointment is often discretionary, dependent on the party head, rather than the result of institutionalized mechanisms or internal quotas (Key Informant Interviews). This reinforces the implementation gaps highlighted in earlier sections and limits women's substantive participation within party governance.

For instance, ANP includes 10 women in its 38-member Central Committee; MQM has two in its 30-member Coordination Committee; and BNP has nine women in a 36-member body. The larger mainstream parties (PML-N, PPPP, and PTI) also include women in their central structures, but the numbers fluctuate and are not formally codified in their constitutions (SDPI, 2025). In most cases, women's elevation to senior positions remains dependent on the personal approval of party leadership rather than transparent internal election mechanisms. Shahida Rehmani,

Secretary of Women Parliamentary Caucus and Member National Assembly, Pakistan People's Party Parliamentarians, says:

"Entrenched patriarchal hierarchies at the grass roots level continue to obstruct women's political advancement. Even when women invest years building constituencies and local credibility, their efforts are often overridden by last-minute party decisions favouring male candidates. Unless political parties institutionalize merit-based selection, women's representation will remain symbolic."

4.1. Apex Decision-Making Forums

Within Pakistan's multi-tiered party structures, real decision-making authority is concentrated in the apex bodies, often titled the Central Executive Committee (CEC), Working Committee, or Majlis-e-Shoora. While membership at the grassroots level is generally open to all, including women, authority sharply narrows toward the top, where leadership remains overwhelmingly male. Historically, only a few women—such as Mohtarma Benazir Bhutto and Begum Nusrat Bhutto of the PPP, and Begum Nasim Wali Khan of the ANP—have held leadership of major political parties, illustrating the rarity of female leadership at these levels.

Two features are common across nearly all political parties:

1. Male-dominated apex decision-making forums: These bodies are typically chaired by the party head, and women's representation remains minimal or symbolic.
2. Parallel women's structures: Most parties maintain women's wings that operate alongside the main hierarchy, even when not formally recognized in party constitutions.

Recent developments indicate gradual change. For instance, in 2024, the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (F) established its first formal women's wing, signaling incremental institutional recognition of women's roles within traditionally conservative parties.

However, apex forums remain largely exclusionary. Crucial decisions such as the provision of parliamentary tickets, cabinet positions, and membership of standing committees are made within these senior bodies, where women's participation is minimal. One interviewee (on condition of anonymity) remarked that this exclusion perpetuates tokenism and prevents women from shaping a party's strategic direction. *"Our exclusion from core party forums keeps women on the margins. It turns representation into tokenism and prevents us from shaping the party's direction or policy priorities."*

The discretion of the party head is paramount; even in relatively progressive parties, such as the PPP, leadership decisions are rarely contested. One respondent observed:

"The leader's word is often accepted unquestioningly and even welcomed."

Political parties maintain provincial, district, and union-council structures, and in some cases, such as the PPP, even ward- or community-level committees. These lower-tier structures offer formal avenues for participation, but their implementation varies widely across parties. Interviews indicate that persistent gendered attitudes continue to affect inclusion: male office-

bearers sometimes exclude female colleagues from meetings by not informing them, whereas women often include their male counterparts in decision-making processes (Key Informant Interviews).

Despite these structural and cultural constraints, some women have succeeded in attaining decision-making roles or holding significant portfolios within party hierarchies. Increasingly, parties appoint women as spokespersons, reflecting perceptions of their reliability and composure. For instance, the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (F) appointed a female MNA as Chief Whip in the National Assembly, while the PPP has nominated women as Information Secretaries, enhancing their visibility and influence in both internal party functions and public-facing roles. Nasreen Jalil, Senior Leader, Muttahida Qaumi Movement, says:

“The MQM created an alternative political pathway for middle- and lower-middle class women who lacked the social or financial capital demanded by mainstream parties. Despite these opportunities, women’s responsibilities have largely remained organizational rather than strategic. The challenge now is to translate women’s party activism into influence over policy and decision-making.”

4.2. Women’s Wings

Women’s entry into active politics in Pakistan has traditionally occurred through women’s wings, which serve as the main channels for mobilization. Almost all major parties maintain such parallel structures at the central, provincial, divisional, and district levels, with defined hierarchies and responsibilities.

These wings perform a dual role. On one hand, they act as training and recruitment grounds for female political activists, providing a relatively safe space for women to organize, network, and mobilize communities. On the other hand, many women leaders view these segregated structures as obstacles that perpetuate gendered divisions within parties, limiting women’s participation in core decision-making processes.

Evidence from a survey of 200 women legislators from the 2013–2018 assemblies conducted by Khan and Naqvi (2020) supports this perception. Women on reserved seats often felt excluded from mainstream party decision-making because they lacked geographical constituencies. About 30 per cent reported being silenced by male colleagues, 11 per cent experienced direct verbal insults, and 6 per cent reported facing physical threats. Harassment through text messages and social media was reported by 26 per cent (Khan & Naqvi, 2020).

Women’s wings are typically mobilized during election campaigns, disaster relief drives, or mass public gatherings, but their engagement with party leadership remains minimal. Although party leaders may solicit nominations from these wings for reserved-seat candidates, the final selection is usually made by senior male leadership. Most of the women interviewed for this study had previously served as office-bearers in the women’s wings of their respective parties and attributed their advancement not to institutional processes but to individual persistence and performance. While women’s wings provide a platform for initial political training, many argued that as long as such segregated structures exist, women will remain peripheral to core decision-

making. Integrating women's wings into formal leadership hierarchies could transform them into effective leadership pipelines rather than auxiliary bodies.

5 Pathways to Representation

Women's pathways into political participation in Pakistan reflect a combination of individual perseverance, party patronage, and entrenched structural barriers. Interviews conducted for this study highlight that, although many women enter politics through personal dedication and sustained service, systematic inequities within party structures continue to shape their advancement. These barriers include limited access to decision-making forums, reliance on male-dominated nomination processes, and the peripheral nature of women's wings, which often restrict women's influence to auxiliary roles rather than core leadership positions.

Most women parliamentarians interviewed attributed their political rise to their personal commitment, activism, and visibility within local communities or party structures. Many shared stories of self-driven engagement that led to recognition by party leaders. Shahida Begum, a women leader of Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Pakistan (JUI-P), says:

Nominations for women's reserved seats are filtered through a hierarchical process from district to provincial to central levels with final decisions made by a male-dominated Central Board. This closed structure underscores the need for transparent and inclusive nomination procedures."

Many women's entry into national-level politics begins through early involvement in student politics and activism. One respondent recounted how her role as a campus organizer enabled her transition to party politics: she was first noticed by her party's student wing, later became a local organizer, and eventually served as a communications head before receiving a parliamentary ticket.

Women from political families also emphasize that lineage alone does not guarantee influence. Even those with established political backgrounds must demonstrate merit and persistence. For instance, MNA Dr. Nafisa Shah of the PPP has reflected publicly on her struggle to establish an independent political identity within a family of seasoned politicians. She first won an elected position (District Nazim) in the 2000 local government elections through her own campaign, later received reserved seats in the National Assembly (2008, 2013), and eventually contested and won general seats in 2018 and 2024.

These personal trajectories highlight a common thread: merit, persistence, and service are essential for women's entry and survival in politics, yet institutional mechanisms seldom recognize or reward these qualities. Empirical evidence supports this observation. Khan and Naqvi (2020) surveyed women legislators from the 2013–2018 assemblies and found:

- 77 per cent of reserved-seat members identified long-term party affiliation as a key factor in their selection.
- 54 per cent believed they had significant grassroots support, despite not being directly elected.

- 22 per cent credited local government experience as instrumental to their selection.
- 27 per cent acknowledged serving as proxies for male relatives.
- Only 19 per cent felt they represented the interests of legislators from their own party.

The study also reported that 77 per cent of respondents considered their experience as party workers their greatest asset, while 36 per cent highlighted professional competence or public service experience as contributing factors. Collectively, these findings underscore that while individual initiative and party engagement are critical, structural and institutional support for women's advancement remains limited.

5.1. Selection and Advancement within Political Parties

The selection process for reserved seats in Pakistan generally begins with a formal application submitted through party structures, often endorsed by provincial or district leadership. Candidates are typically assessed based on their loyalty, visibility, and perceived contributions to the party's image. Educational qualifications and proximity to influential figures also play a significant role in shaping their prospects.

Despite this initial process, final decisions rest with central party leadership, particularly the parliamentary boards responsible for reviewing applications and approving the final lists submitted to the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP). Interviews indicate that party loyalty is often prioritized over competence, and connections with senior members can decisively influence a candidate's ranking on party lists. This highlights how advancement within parties depends not only on individual merit or public service experience but also on navigating hierarchical networks and internal patronage systems.

One interviewee said: "Even when district leaderships propose names, the central leadership ultimately reshuffles the list. What truly determines whether a woman reaches the Assembly is not just being nominated, but where she is placed on the list."

This concentration of decision-making authority underscores the structural asymmetry that women face as informal networks and elite patronage often outweigh institutional processes, thereby limiting merit-based advancement.

5.2. Barriers in Transitioning to General Seats

While reserved seats have expanded women's presence in legislatures, they have also entrenched dependency on party hierarchies. Few women transition from reserved to general seats, partly due to the high cost of campaigning and lack of access to financial networks. Former Senator Farhatullah Babar, the former Senator, Pakistan Peoples Party Parliamentarians, says:

"The political disempowerment of women originates within political parties themselves. Critical decisions, particularly nominations for parliament, are made in Central Executive Committees where women's presence is negligible. Without reforming these internal mechanisms, gender equality in politics will remain rhetorical."

A recurring theme among interviewees was the **economic barrier**: Nomination fees, campaign financing, and the logistical demands of constituency mobilization make it extremely difficult for women especially from middle- and lower-income backgrounds to contest general elections. The cost of running a campaign for a National Assembly seat now reaches tens of millions of rupees, making self-financing prohibitive.

Some women also highlighted educational and class barriers. Although electoral law does not impose an educational requirement, political parties tend to favour more educated, urban women for reserved seats, leaving grass roots activists with limited prospects. As a result, women from modest or rural backgrounds despite their strong community networks rarely gain visibility within the political party.

These barriers are further reinforced by patriarchal norms within parties. Interviewees described instances where promised tickets were withdrawn at the last moment in favour of male candidates, or where women were assigned unwinnable constituencies to fulfil legal quotas.

Nonetheless, women parliamentarians continue to advocate for a dual strategy: retaining reserved seats while promoting constituency-based participation to build credibility and political capital.

Representation at grass roots level requires deliberate policy mechanisms to ensure diversity in women's political participation across urban and rural constituencies.

These insights underline the importance of institutional reforms in candidate's selection, financing mechanisms, and internal party democracy. Creating pathways that combine merit-based advancement with financial and institutional support is essential for achieving sustainable gender inclusion in Pakistan's political landscape.

5.3. Institutional and Structural Barriers

At the institutional level, political parties continue to function through centralized and male-dominated decision-making systems. While party constitutions generally advocate equality, their implementation remains uneven. Women are often excluded from key forums where critical policy and nomination decisions are made.

The study finds several examples of exclusionary practices: promised tickets being withdrawn at the last minute in favour of male candidates, allocation of party tickets to women in unwinnable constituencies, and financial or logistical support being provided exclusively to male nominees. Such practices not only undermine the spirit of inclusion but also discourage women from sustained engagement in party politics. Shaista Parvez Malik, Member National Assembly, Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz, says:

"In most political parties, men focus on constituency management and electoral mobilization, while women shoulder the burden of social and community work. This division reinforces gendered stereotypes and sidelines women from strategic decision-making roles that define party direction and public policy. Women who have already served two consecutive terms on

reserved seats should now be encouraged and supported by their parties to contest directly from their constituencies. This shift would institutionalize women's political credibility and create a genuine leadership pipeline."

Furthermore, the opaque internal governance of political parties amplifies gender bias. Even when internal elections are held, women candidates are rarely fielded for powerful positions such as general secretaries, presidents, or parliamentary board members. Most women occupy roles limited to social welfare, education, or communication reflecting an implicit gender division of labour within political organizations.

5.4. Cultural and Political Barriers

Deep-rooted patriarchal attitudes within society and political organizations continue to influence women's participation. Leadership roles are still viewed as inherently male domains, and women's contributions are often undervalued or dismissed as secondary.

One interviewee described how male colleagues sometimes exclude women from meetings by withholding information, while others trivialize women's political work as "symbolic participation." Another parliamentarian noted that women who assert authority are frequently labeled as "forceful" a perception that deters younger women from pursuing leadership positions.

Cultural expectations also impose a double burden on women politicians. Balancing domestic responsibilities with political obligations limits their time and mobility, particularly during election campaigns or long assembly sessions. Many respondents highlighted that political gatherings, often held late at night or in male-dominated spaces, are not accessible to them because of societal constraints.

5.5. Economic Barriers

Economic dependency remains a decisive factor in shaping women's political outlook. The high cost of electoral participation, combined with limited access to party funds and campaign networks, restricts women's ability to contest general seats.

Applicants for party tickets must pay a prescribed fee to the party and deposit additional amounts to the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP). Campaign expenditures covering advertising, transportation, and constituency outreach run into millions, excluding most women from middle- or lower-income backgrounds.

While some parties provide limited financial assistance, these resources are generally directed toward male candidates perceived as having higher winning potential. As one senator explained, the Senate offers a comparatively lower-cost entry point but contesting National or Provincial Assembly elections requires substantial financial backing.

This lack of equitable funding mechanisms perpetuates a cycle of exclusion: women without personal wealth or elite networks remain reliant on reserved seats, while wealthier male candidates dominate general elections.

5.6. Legal and Religious Barriers

Although Pakistan's constitutional framework affirms gender equality, gaps in enforcement dilute its impact. Provisions such as the five per cent mandatory ticket allocation for women (Section 206, *Election Act 2017*) are often treated as ceilings rather than floors. The law prescribes minimal representation but does not bind political parties to place women in winnable constituencies or decision-making roles.

Religious interpretations have also been selectively invoked to question women's leadership roles, particularly in conservative political parties. Despite constitutional guarantees, some clerical circles continue to argue that women's leadership contradicts traditional norms. However, this resistance is increasingly challenged by religious scholars and women within religious political parties who cite examples of women leaders in early Islamic history to legitimize their political participation.

5.7. Intersectional Challenges

Gender interacts with class, geography, and education to deepen exclusion. Most women on reserved seats hail from urban, educated, and middle-class backgrounds, while rural and working-class women who often bear the brunt of social inequality remain underrepresented. This concentration of representation within metropolitan elites reinforces the perception that women's political participation is confined to privileged segments of society. Fawzia Arshad, Senator, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, says:

"Reserved seats have unintentionally reinforced urban concentration, sidelining women from rural and peripheral districts. For balanced representation, reserved seats should be directly contested alongside general seats under the Election Act 2017. Electoral reform must correct this structural distortion to ensure women from all regions have a political voice."

Intersectional analysis also highlights how ethnicity and regional disparities shape opportunity. Women from Balochistan, Gilgit-Baltistan, and southern parts of KP cited limited party infrastructure, fewer resources, and traditional restrictions as major impediments to political engagement.

5.8. Synthesis

The major underlying driver across all barriers remains patriarchal political culture and entrenched mindset that views women as auxiliaries rather than leaders. While legal frameworks and quotas have opened doors, meaningful inclusion continues to be constrained by informal hierarchies and structural inertia.

Removing these barriers requires not only legislative amendments but also institutional accountability, gender-responsive budgeting within parties, and continuous capacity building for emerging women leaders. The evidence underscores that without reforming internal party governance and financing mechanisms, women's political participation will remain symbolic rather than transformative.

6. Recommendations and Conclusions

6.1. Policy Recommendations

6.1.1. Constitutional and Legislative Reforms

We recommend the following reforms:

- Amend Sections 207 and 208 of the *Election Act 2017* to ensure that women are at least **33 per cent of members in all elected and non-elected decision-making bodies** of political parties (e.g., CECs, provincial, divisional, and district committees) be women.

To bring equity to play its role, it's recommended to:

- Amend Articles 51⁹ and 106¹⁰ of the Constitution to achieve equity by mandating that at least one woman is fielded by each political party in constitution with three or four general-seat candidates.
- Revise Section 206 of the *Election Act 2017* to raise the quota of women's general-seat tickets incrementally from the current 5 per cent to 10 per cent and then to 15 per cent in subsequent election cycles.
- **Link party registration with compliance:** political parties should be required to submit a proof of a minimum of 33 per cent female membership at the time of registration with the ECP.

6.1.2. Institutional and Party-Level Reforms

- Integrate women wings into mainstream party structures, ensuring representation in top decision-making forums rather than parallel auxiliary roles.
- Establish party training and leadership schools to build women's capacities in legislation, media engagement, and governance, thereby institutionalizing women's political mentorship.
- Introduce an ECP-led Gender Party Audit as a recurring compliance and accountability instrument.
- Mandate internal gender audits by both the Election Commission of Pakistan and political parties to assess progress in women's participation, leadership, and funding.
- Introduce accountability mechanisms by demanding annual gender-disaggregated reports from parties on ticket allocation, campaign financing, and internal elections.

6.1.3. Financial and Resource Support

- Create a dedicated campaign support fund within each political party to subsidize election expenses for women candidates, particularly for those contesting general seats.

⁹ <https://www.pakistani.org/pakistan/constitution/part3.ch2.html>

¹⁰ <https://www.pakistani.org/pakistan/constitution/part4.ch2.html>

- Require the ECP to earmark public funding incentives for parties that exceed mandatory quotas or demonstrate equitable gender representation.
- Allocate constituency development funds directly to women parliamentarians to enhance their engagement with local communities and strengthen their political visibility.
- Strengthen compliance reporting and verification mechanisms to prevent symbolic adherence.
- Build party capacities to implement gender inclusion reforms with measurable benchmarks.
- Establish an implementation monitoring mechanism with periodic public reporting.

6.1.4. Socio-Cultural and Advocacy Measures

- Highlight women's leadership achievements and contributions to governance through public awareness campaigns.
- Engage media partners and civil-society organizations to challenge stereotypes and promote positive narratives around women's political roles.
- Encourage inter-party women's networks for peer support and experience sharing so that they might reinforce solidarity beyond partisan boundaries.

6.2. Conclusion

Women's political participation in Pakistan has seen measurable progress over the decades, yet meaningful inclusion remains constrained by structural, institutional, and cultural barriers. While reserved seats and women's wings provide entry points, they often function as ceilings rather than springboards, limiting access to core decision-making and leadership positions within political parties. Geographic concentration, party hierarchies, and patriarchal norms further restrict women's influence, undermining the transformative potential of their legislative contributions.

Empirical evidence demonstrates that women parliamentarians are highly effective in shaping legislation, engaging in cross-party collaboration, and addressing critical issues beyond gender, including climate resilience, economic equity, and institutional reform. This underscores that the challenge is not a lack of capability but systemic barriers that prevent women from exercising full political agency.

Advancing gender equality in political participation requires deliberate legal and institutional reforms. Embedding a mandatory 33% representation of women across all party decision-making forums, introducing regular party-level gender audits through the Election Commission of Pakistan, and ensuring women's presence in the registration of new political parties are critical measures. Such reforms would institutionalize women's leadership, strengthen accountability mechanisms, and ensure that political structures reflect the diversity and aspirations of Pakistan's population.

Ultimately, achieving substantive political inclusion for women is not merely a matter of representation; it is a cornerstone for inclusive governance, democratic resilience, and the realization of Pakistan's constitutional and international commitments, including obligations

under CEDAW, ICCPR, UDHR, and the SDGs. Only through these structural and institutional reforms can Pakistan move toward a truly equitable political ecosystem where women's voices are central, recognized, and empowered.

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Annexure-A

List of Key Informant Interviews

Name	Designation / Role		Affiliation / Political Party		
Ms Shahida Rehmani	Member Assembly	National	Pakistan Peoples Parliamentarians		Party
Mr Farhatullah Babar	Former Senator		Pakistan Peoples Parliamentarians		Party
Ms Fawzia Arshad	Senator		Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf		
Dr Zargha Suharwardy Taimur	Senator		Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf		
Ms Shaista Parvez Malik	Member Assembly	National	Pakistan Muslim League – Nawaz		
Ms Shahida Begum	Member Assembly	National	Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (Pakistan)		
Ms Naeema Kishwar Khan	Member Assembly	National	Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (Pakistan)		
Ms Nasreen Jalil	Former Senator		Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM)		
Ms Sabeen Ghoury	Member Assembly	National	Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM)		
Ms Munazza Hassan	Senior Leader		Istehkam-e-Pakistan Party		